Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

STUDENT SERVICES

ACADEMIC YEAR 2015

Confidential

Date: December 2015

Contents

Introduction

"Student Services", as a single unit, was the focus of this review. However, despite the united identification, we must acknowledge that the review in reality was of a collection of 9 sub-departments joined by the theme of providing front-facing services to the student body. The departments included the Student Services' Hub, Counselling, Health, Budgeting Advice, Chaplaincy, Sports and Physical Recreation, Student Engagement, Accommodation, and the University Crèche. Even with the common thread of serving the student body, the unit scope does not include Careers, Academic Advisory and Access which could, arguably, share the "serving students" theme but which lie under Registry. The line management for all these departments run currently through the Academic Registrar but it is anticipated that those under the "Student Services" category will switch to a new Executive position in process of being appointed in the next few months.

The review took place over 2 days on Wednesday, 9th and Thursday 10th December, the previous service review having taken place in 2010.

1. Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Dr Christine Lusk	University of St Andrews	Director of Student Services
Dr Pat Morgan	NUI Galway	VP for the Student Experience
Dr Maurice Devlin	Maynooth University	Head of Dept. Applied Social Studies
Ms Helen Fallon	Maynooth University	Deputy Librarian
Mr Andrew Garrad	Maynooth University	Former VP Education, MSU

3.   Timetable of the site visit

In terms of receipt of paperwork and instructions and guidance in advance of the meeting, the timetable was appropriate. In terms of the visit itself, the timetable was well structured ensuring that relevant constituencies and representatives of stakeholder groups were made available to the reviewers in a relatively tight timetable. A pre-review informal dinner was a welcome opportunity for the review group to meet for the first time. An early morning briefing from the Vice President, Strategy & Quality ensured the reviewers were clear on the process. The provided timetable and the process proceeded smoothly and by and large according to the time schedule. Overall this was a busy timetable but one which made maximum usage of the reviewers' time. It was sufficient to allow a deep engagement with the review process to be undertaken.

4.   Peer Review Methodology

4.1   Site Visit

The site visit for the Review was conducted over two intensive days which gave the Peer Review Group an opportunity to see the units under review as part of Student Services and to meet with appropriate University staff, and student representatives. People engaged with the Peer Review Group and were happy to share their experiences and insights with us. Overall the meetings were a very positive experience. We recognize the significant time and effort spent on preparation of the self assessment report in the months and weeks leading up to the visit and during the visit itself, and wish to express our thanks to the University and all the people who met with us or input to the process in any way. We very much appreciated the warm hospitality associated with our visit.

4.2   Peer Review Group Report

The Peer Review Group worked closely together throughout the process, and collectively formed a summary overview of the current state of Student Services. Through dialogue the group identified key concerns and were in agreement on our findings and commendations and recommendations for the exit presentation which concluded the visit. These are summarised in the pages that follow.

5. Overall Assessment

5.1 Summary Assessment of the Present State of the Unit

All staff met are committed to the students with whom they work. The goodwill amongst the staff was tangible with each person striving to enable the success of their students to graduation. In spite of a difficult period of financial stress, they have emerged now with good humour and are clear about how they want to enhance the student experience within their own perspective of student service.

However, the unit, although addressed in the review as a "whole", is rather a gathering of disparate departments who are focussed on their own perspective of the work with students, rather than being drawn out to play a part in the overall student experience as part of a team.

The governance of the unit became a key area of focus for the panel, indicating that staff were unsure if they had a solid representation at University Executive level, a champion who realised their current challenges and was speaking on their behalf. They took this from the recent reshuffling of their line management due to senior staff realignments. From this perceived lack of senior representation came a number of other areas where clarity was sought, e.g. funding of student clubs and societies.

The students interviewed reported exceptional satisfaction with their interactions with individuals in the unit. Indeed, the staff are focussed on the personal service, but in some areas this seems to have been at the expense of developing useful business models. In some departments the over emphasis on working face to face, and less on recording that interaction and its outcomes for students, has seen a lack of emphasis on collecting data and this may pose a threat in the future if they are asked for objective and tangible evidence of their good practice.   The lack of data also extends to the lack of a united software IT system which could assist in uniting a student's contact with the service and offer a more joined up experience.

5.2 Self-Assessment Report

The Peer Review Group welcomed the Student Services Self-Assessment Report prior to the visit. The standardised format helped to guide focus and the organisation by theme helped demonstrate areas of common concern. The involvement of staff across all units in Student Service in preparing the Report was noted and appreciated by the Review Group and the report served as a really useful basis for consideration of the Unit and helped inform all our discussions and meetings.

6. Findings of the Peer Review Group: Commendations and Recommendations

6.1 Overview

Commendations have to be made to the staff who displayed exceptional commitment to their students. These include those working tirelessly in a proactive fashion with the student community and with other units equally committed to students, e.g. the Access office.

Referring to 5.1 above, recommendations are offered below by way of extending the good practice to encourage more collaboration of work between sub-sets of this unit, offering clarity of leadership and structuring the recording of outcomes to demonstrate that practice.

It was noted that some of the previous findings of the 2010 review were still ongoing or had not been acted upon and it is hoped that this panel's recommendations below will be given serious consideration in light of the strength of feeling by the staff who trusted us with their opinions.

6.2 Commendations

The Student Services Unit has a very committed staff who strive to provide quality services to students, in a challenging higher education environment. All sub-sets of the unit came in for praise in different discussions. Although the staff felt, anecdotally, that their relations with their student clients were good, it was appreciated by all when the students absolutely backed this up by being highly complimentary of all interactions with individuals. It should also be noted that the student representatives were selected randomly and did not reflect any particular group of students. Thus their views can be considered representative of the broader student body.

Insofar as possible, the Unit operates an open door policy and there is a general sense of welcome throughout the service from the people within. This is important given that the physical environment of the service is not ideal and in all buildings visited we noted a real effort needed by the staff to overcome the setting which was often not student-friendly in itself, but could be adapted to be so.

There was a strong sense of concern for student welfare in all its aspects noted in discussions with students and a strong desire from staff to provide best possible service.

6.3   Recommendations for Improvement

Unit Governance and Organisations

The uncertainty about the future governance of the Unit, and the perception of a lack of a voice at University Executive is demoralising. The artificial division between academic and non-academic student services is unhelpful and does not promote the "student experience" in its entirety. The term "Student Services" may be outdated, emphasising a servant role rather than an empowering partnership and students have voiced their affiliation to the term "Student Life" which embodies the area surrounding the academic core.

6.3.1.   It is strongly recommended that the University Executive appoint a Dean of Students – one who sits on the University Executive – who will be a strategic leader of the Student Experience and head up a newly formed unit to be known as "Student Life". Under this model, the student front facing departments - Academic Advisory, Careers and Access would be brought from Registry to join those currently sitting in Student Services to form the Student Life unit led by the new Dean.

6.3.2   In terms of internal governance, 10 direct reports to the Director creates an unwieldy structure which requires reforming. 4 clusters are identifiable, the 3 currently plus the 1 from those services currently in the Registry and leaders identified in each cluster would see a more streamlined structure. Student Services currently covers the work in an area of not insignificant risk to the university – especially in an increasingly litigious context. Given the proposal to increase the student population it is important to get an internal structure which can be resilient and minimise the risk by underpinning professionalism.

IT systems / Data

Efforts to improve and develop services are hampered by a lack of systematic data gathering, therefore perspectives on what needs to be done to develop the service is not based on clear evidence. There is no evidence of a Strategic Plan and the business analysis of the service, objectively with targets and vision, needs clarification. Without this the Unit risks further fragmentation and lack of focus. It was recognised that the current IT systems being used by the Student Services' unit need to be updated and be a strategic focus of the IT strategy group.

6.3.3   Monitoring and enhancing the Student Experience will require the introduction of a unified record for each individual student and therefore it is recommended that any future IT software development addressing the student should include consideration of extending its use through the Student Services' unit staff systems and Student Life under the newly organised structure.

6.3.4   It is encouraged that the unit staff address, as a matter of urgency, what they can do now to collect data to evidence their activity and interaction with students. In some cases systems are in place but under-used, in others systems need to be introduced.   Urgent attention to this issue now will allow the staff to pilot the information which is most useful for them, helping to direct the design and application of wider systems to be developed in future.

Staffing and Staff Development
Administration is fragmented across Student Services, with administrative support being assigned to specific units. Joining up administration across the Service could contribute to cost effective efficiencies, better data sharing and a more complete student experience. However initially staff need to adopt collaborative-working mindsets.   Although best practice can be identified in all their strands of focus, they are not thinking as a "whole unit". This leads to an under-utilisation of their talents and produces less optimal results in the student experience.

6.3.5   A Benchmarking Exercise is recommended. With a view to encouraging the staff to think beyond their own immediate work focus, it is recommended that a broad selection of Student Services' staff are facilitated to explore different practices in their field throughout the HE sector. A benchmarking report should be produced by the end of second semester, June 2016, informing future practice.

6.3.6   The panel would support the staff's expressed desire for a comprehensive staff development programme, particularly assisting in the development of cross functional collaboration.

Resourcing

Decisions on funding need to be evidence based. While there may be a good financial argument for sports investment, it is not clear a business case is being made and links between the Sports Centre and other units, e.g., Health Centre are not being developed in such a way as to maximise the student experience. There is no provision for top slicing funds for student experience projects or for building up such project funds over a series of years. The panel was disappointed to learn that the previously valued committee reviewing Students' Union and Clubs and Societies capitation funds from the University had been discontinued without anyone at Executive level taking ownership to continue its work. Internally it is understood that the financial budget is allocated directly to the sub sets of Student Services, by-passing the Director. This takes away a crucial tool for authority and limits her ability to manage.

6.3.7.   It is recommended that the united unit budget be allocated to the Director, with assumed authority to sub-divide, re-allocate and distribute lying with her, thus allowing her to respond to student need and the organic nature of managing the student experience, often an unpredictable area.

6.3.8.   Funding guidance for student societies and clubs should be informed by the special experience from both Students' Union and Student Services. It is recommended that the senior Capitation Committee be reinstated as soon as possible with representation from Student Life, Students' Union, the Bursar's Office and academics.

Internal and External Communications
It is important that the unit recognise and acknowledge the very important relationship that the Students' Union has with its student body.
6.3.9.   It is recommended that new attention to communication between divisions within the service and with the Students' Union should protect that very special relationship. The communication needs to be frequent, and developed to cover both formal and informal professional liaison.
6.3.10. An exercise is needed where professional staff in Student Services can join together in an open and honest exploration of their current balance between confidentiality and disclosure.   Considerations need to, of course, pay attention to professional compliance and legislative limitations, but should also consider legislative demands of "who needs to know" and how staff can protect both the student and other members of their community, be they other students and/or colleagues. Institutional risk needs to be identified within current practice some of which may see confidentiality as an absolute concept.

Services and engagement with user groups

The buildings presented a mixed assessment in terms of their fitness for purpose.

6.3.11. The Sports' Centre carries good potential, but the equipment is poor and the facilities urgently require upgrading. In addition it would be beneficial to have a review of the need for a swimming pool or the identification of local appropriate swimming facilities which are not currently available. It is important that the expert operational views of staff are consulted before work is undertaken on their behalf to ensure appropriate measures are undertaken. It was reported by numerous people that admissions are being, and will continue to be, negatively influenced by poor Sports facilities.

6.3.12.   Environments which would benefit from review include the Student Hub, which, although staffed by friendly staff, gave a structural presentation which was not welcoming or obvious, students did not identify it as a desk they could approach as a point of first contact. The Counselling service and that of the Budgeting Advisor are both placed in a physical location which students considered to be such that accessing them is difficult and noted that hiding them away suggested that students should be somewhat ashamed to be seen to use them.   It is important that the current facilities are explored from the perspective of a new student walking in – the Students' Union representatives and students who avail of the services might assist with ideas of how to make the current facilities more welcoming for students. There are several 'quick and easy wins' that could be made by making the decor more colourful, inviting and student friendly.
6.3.13. Whilst the Créche is a warm and inviting space, it is not being used to its capacity. Some effort has been made to attract locals, however the hours of opening (from 8.45am) make it an unrealistic option for most working parents, who are likely to need to travel to work at an earlier hour. In addition,

the lack of baby care facilities sees families understandably starting their children elsewhere and then continuing there.

6.3.14. The on-campus Accommodation Service is popular with students, but there is not sufficient availability and the open nature of the campus 24/7 is of some concern.   The case for restoring the common space back in the river apartments office building that is currently being used as the APT lecture theatre was well made and should be acted on to allow for res-life activities and a social space for residents, some of whom will remain on campus during holidays when other University social spaces will be closed.

6.3.15. The continuation of centralising the points of first contact with students and the admin through the hub is recommended. Students expressed approval of the idea of a single front desk, and valued the benefits it could add to their experience. Unfortunately, however, they seemed unaware that there currently was one being trialled and the publicity of this could be revisited and enhanced.

The tables below categorise recommendations as being strategic, unit level or sub unit level, in line with the guidance notes accompanying this template

Strategic Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
S.1	Appoint a Dean of students – part of the University Executive – who will be a strategic leader of the student experience and the cohesiveness of the student lifecycle as a whole.	Under this model, the student front facing departments - Academic Advisory, Careers and Access would be part of a new unit known as "Student Life" led by the new Dean.
S.2	3 clusters of sub-units, as outlined in the self assessment report, be created with the appointment of a leader for each cluster	Natural leaders may emerge in each group, given the professional development opportunity. Otherwise a leader of each group may be appointable on a rotation basis? Could some financial remuneration be offered as an incentive for the staff to move up into this more responsible position?
S.3	Introduction of University-wide IT systems focussing on student monitoring that should consider the expansion to standardise systems for Student Services and the new Student Life section	
S.4.	Student Services allocation of funding should be unit-wide and allocated to the Director for further in-unit allocation by her.	
S.5.	Reinstate the Capitation Committee	with representation from Students' Union, Student Services and academics.
S.6	Secure the Budgeting Advisory Services	Current contract due to end shortly

Whole of Unit Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
U.1	Staff should address data collection for purposes of evidencing current practice.	Current systems are in place in some areas but need analysis. Some areas need to introduce new systems but these need not be elaborate. Student interns might be used for high level, non confidential analysis?
U.2	Benchmarking exercise	
U.3.	Staff Development Programme across all staff in the unit	Focus on collaborative working
U.4.	Student Services staff and Student Union staff should develop a closer working partnership	The initiative for this should come from the Student Services Director but communication should be embedded throughout all levels thereafter.
U.5.	Professional staff exercise to examine the current balance between confidentiality and disclosure	Although involving all professional practitioners, this might benefit from the inclusion of an external facilitator who has experience and knowledge of the complex issues involved in professional communication balance.

Sub-Unit Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
1. Sports Centre	Urgent review of facilities and equipment	Taking evidence from current operational staff expertise
2. Counselling **Budgeting Adviser** **The Hub staff**	Work with student representatives and within current space limitations to try to maximise student friendly potential	
3. Crèche	Review current usage	key points of emphasis should include earlier starting times, baby room and summer staff retainers/redeployment.
4. Accommodation	Revert use of APT building to common room space and consider blocking public access to accommodation at night.	

Student Services Quality Review
December 2015
Timetable
Wednesday 9th December 2015

TIME	DETAIL	PURPOSE OF MEETING	VENUE	PRESENT
8.15-9.15am	Welcome and Introduction	Discuss quality review process, timetable, logistical issues and paperwork	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Jim Walsh
9.15-9.45am	Meet with Aidan Mulkeen, VP Academic/Registrar and Deputy President	Give an overview of student services in the context of the University's structure and strategic plan	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Aidan Mulkeen
9.45-10.30am	Meet with Director of Student Services	Discuss quality review process and issues arising from SAR	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Niamh Lynch, Director Student Services
10.30-11.20am	Meet with Cluster 1 Student Life (Sports & Physical Recreation, Student Engagement)	Discuss issues arising from SAR relevant to Student Services Dept	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Ian Russell, Student Engagement Officer Paul Davis, Sports Officer, Dennis Bowes (Rugby Dev Officer) Jenny Duffy (GAA Dev. Officer) Barry Fennelly (Golf Manager)

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				Barry Prenderville (Soccer Dev. Officer) Gail Fitzpatrick (sports admin)
11.20-12.10pm	Meet Cluster 2 Student Wellbeing (Chaplaincy, Counselling, Health Centre)	Discuss issues arising from SAR relevant to Student Services Dept	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Shay Claffey, Chaplain Kathleen McNutt, Head of Counselling Deirdre McDonagh (counsellor) Denise Stokes (counsellor) Antoinette Mooney (admin counselling) Kathleen Cox, Nurse Aisling Quan (nurse) Rose Breheny (admin health centre) Dr Helen O'Leary, (GP)
12.10-1.00pm	Meet Cluster 3 Campus Living (Accommodation, Student Budgeting, Creche and Student Services Hub)	Discuss issues arising from SAR relevant to Student Services Dept	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Corla Mansfield, Accommodation Officer Niamh Banks, residence supervisor Seamus Carr, residence supervisor Aoife Collins, accommodation admin Maria Fahy, accommodation admin Maureen Reilly, Student budgeting advisor Mary Coleman, Creche Manager Caitriona McGrattan (student services hub) Nuala Downes (student services hub)

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Time	Activity	Discussion	Location	Attendees
1.00-2.00pm	Lunch		Pugin reserve table	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Jim Walsh
2.00-3.00pm	Walk to North Campus. Overview location of activities. Meet staff in crèche.		Student Services Boardroom	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Mary Coleman (Crèche Manager) Deborah Kenny (Asst Manager Crèche) Annemarie Brannick, Crèche Lorna McCarthy, Crèche Karina Roe Crèche Fiona Ryan, Crèche Karen Tracey, Crèche Elaine Walsh, Crèche
3.00-3.30pm	Meet with Heads/Staff from other Depts.	Discuss interaction of Student Services with other administrative depts.	Student Services Boardroom	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Sheila Purcell (Admissions) Claire Doran (International office) Michael Rafter (Campus Services)
3.30-4.30pm A	Meeting with Students Union Officers	Discuss the views of SU Sabbatical Officers on relevant Students Services issues	Student Services Boardroom	Reviewers A Matt O'Boyle/President confirmed Dillon Grace/VP Education confirmed Síona Cahill/VP Welfare & Equality Eric Lawless/VP Clubs Societies & Student Engagement
3.30-4.00pm B	Meet with Student Union Staff David Ryan/Manager MSU	Discuss the views of SU Staff on relevant Students Services issues	An Tobar	Reviewers B David Ryan/Manager MSU

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4.30-5.00pm A	Meeting with UG Students re Sports & Recreation		Student Services Boardroom	Reviewers A UG Students
4.00-4.30pm B	Meeting with UG Students re campus accommodation, crèche and personal budgeting		An Tobar	Reviewers B UG Students
5.00-5.30 pm A	Meeting with UG Students re engagement (participation in clubs & societies etc.)		Student Services Boardroom	Reviewers A UG Students
4.30-5.00 pm B	Meeting with Síona Cahill (VP Welfare & Equality MSU) & UG Students re health services, counselling and chaplaincy		An Tobar	Reviewers B Síona Cahill (VP Welfare and Equality) & UG Students
5.30-5.45pm A	Individual Meeting/Shay Claffey/Chaplain		Student Services Boardroom	Reviewers A Shay Claffey
5.00-5.15pm B	Individual Meeting/Catherine Black/Chaplain		An Tobar	Reviewers B Catherine Black
5.15-5.45pm B	Individual Meeting/Ian Russell/Student Engagement Officer		An Tobar	Reviewers B Ian Russell
5.45-6.15pm	Meeting with HR Director/Rosaleen McCarthy & Ashley O'Donoghue	Discuss staff development and staffing levels	Student Services Boardroom	Reviewers Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Rosaleen McCarthy Ashley O'Donoghue
6.30pm	Return to Carton			
7.30pm	Dinner			Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad

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Thursday 10ᵗʰ December 2015

TIME	DETAIL	PURPOSE OF MEETING	VENUE	PRESENT
9.00-9.35am	Meet with Jim Walsh	Clarifications of expectations for later meetings. Any high level matters or documentation requiring attention	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Jim Walsh
9.35-9.55am	Meet with Director of Access/Rose Ryan		Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Rose Ryan/Director of Access
10.00-10.30am	Meet with International Students	Discuss the views of international students on relevant student services issues	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad International Students
10.30-11.00am	Meet with Tom Kenny/Bursars Office	Discuss use of student funds	Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Tom Kenny (Bursars Office)
11.00-12.15pm	Meet with Director of Student Services		Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Niamh Lynch

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Time	Activity		Location	Attendees
12.15-12.30pm	Meet with Ray O'Neill/VP Innovation		Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Ray O'Neill
12.45-1.45pm	Lunch/w Jim Walsh		Pugin	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad Jim Walsh
1.45-3.00pm	Prepare for Exit Presentation		Council Room	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad
3.00-4.00pm	Exit presentation and reception		Renehan Hall	Christine Lusk Pat Morgan Maurice Devlin Helen Fallon Andrew Garrad All Staff

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Dr Christine Lusk
University of St Andrews
External Reviewer   _____

Dr Pat Morgan
NUIG
External Reviewer   _____

Dr Maurice Devlin
Maynooth University

Internal Reviewer   ____ Maurice Devlin _____

Ms Helen Fallon
Maynooth University

Internal Reviewer   ___ Helen Fallon _____

Mr Andrew Garrad
Maynooth University

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